

**Region 7 Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)**  
**Summer Meeting**  
**August 21, 2018 – Waterplant Park**

**FWP Staff Present:** Brad Schmitz, Mike Backes, Erin O'Connor, Marla Prell, Jack Austin, John Ensign and Todd Anderson

**CAC Members Present:** Bob Gilbert, Bob Hagedorn, Gary Sparks, Ed Bukoskey, Dale Kreiman, Mark Frisinger and Glenn Heitz

**Guests Present:** Representative Ken Holmlund (HD38), Sally Hagedorn, Glenda Kreiman, Dee Gilbert, Shirley Bukoskey, guest of Mark Frisinger

Brad Schmitz, Regional Supervisor, began the meeting by welcoming everyone. This is our annual summer meeting, and we will plan to meet again this winter sometime before the legislative session starts. He has asked the program managers to provide an update today on what's been going on within their respective programs.

**Wildlife Division Update**

Region 7 Wildlife Manager John Ensign began by saying that our hunting seasons have started with the 900-series antelope hunting kicking off last week. In this region, we lost six Block Management Areas (BMA's) this year. This was mostly due to changes in management or the property being sold. However, we gained 12 new BMA's which are located throughout the region. Overall, we have 262 BMA's, or 320 cooperators, which is on par for the last five years. This equates to about 15% of the private land in Region 7.

The biologists have been busy with surveys. Weather was a big factor this year and it didn't work in our favor numerous times. There was a lot of concern this spring with how game fared. We anticipated a higher than usual over-winter mortality, particularly in antelope, and especially in the north/northwestern part of the region. Surprisingly, the situation ended up being not as bad as we had anticipated. Mule deer numbers are about 21% lower than last year; however, we were 47% above long-term average (LTA) last year. Currently, mule deer are about 26% above long-term average (LTA). Our surveys found about 49 fawns per 100 adult does.

One thing to note is that we observed over utilization of winter browse species last fall & winter due to the drought conditions. Animals were noted to be consuming some of those browse species in the fall already, which meant there was little when winter conditions came.

Antelope numbers are currently right at the LTA. Surveys found 59 bucks per 100 does and 77 fawns per 100 does, which are good numbers. There also seems to be a great number of yearling bucks on the landscape. Thus, we decided to issue 8000 either-sex tags this year and stuck with 1500 doe/fawn tags.

We are presently experiencing a bit of elk game damage in the southern part of the region. There is a damage hunt taking place in the Birney area on two properties where alfalfa crop damage has been occurring.

Unfortunately, John feels our upland bird numbers are not great. Winter took a toll on our birds. Add to that eight inches of rain that fell in June, which is the same time as the peak of hatching. Young birds are not able to thermoregulate themselves for a while, so the rainy conditions were not in their favor, and many likely perished.

Ed noted that he saw some small pheasant chicks the other day. John said this is likely a second hatch, which is good. Whether those birds make it into and through winter when they're this young this late, is iffy.

Rep. Holmlund asked if we do anything with coyotes or other predators. John replied that we don't, outside of bears and lions. Brad added that we occasionally hear of a wolf passing through. John then briefly discussed the status of grizzly bears in the state.

John continued by saying that his staff is currently working on a couple Conservation Easements (CE) throughout the region, and there's possibilities for several more. Locations for those include Hysham, Locate, Richey, Powderville, and Wibaux.

The CE most have likely heard about is the Horse Creek CE near Hodges. Another one that is currently progressing through the many stages is the North Sunday Creek CE near Angela. We will be hosting a public meeting to discuss this particular CE on Wednesday, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 6:30 at the R7 office. The public comment period is open now until September 8<sup>th</sup>; folks can submit written comment online if they wish. The Environmental Assessment is available to view online as well.

Mark asked where the one near Richey was located. John replied that particular one is by the divide and is a little bit different. Most CE's are Habitat Montana easements where what we're looking at is conserving native range and habitat. This one near Richey has a lot of crop ground in it and what we're pursuing there is an easement through the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program. Its currently being referred to as North Lisk Creek.

### **Enforcement Division Update**

Region 7 Warden Captain Jack Austin began by saying although it isn't something new to us, we're experiencing some turnover within the region's Enforcement staff. In the last 12 to 15 months, we've lost wardens in Colstrip/Forsyth, Sidney, Glendive (twice), Jordan and Broadus, mostly due to transfers to other regions. Fortunately, we seem pretty stable in Baker and Decker. We have new wardens in Broadus and Jordan and will be acquiring additional new folks in Colstrip/Forsyth, Miles City and Glendive over the next several months. Sidney will likely be vacant for some time. Unfortunately, when those wardens left we also lost all of our field training officers, one of our two firearms instructors and all of our defensive tactics instructors. These are all disciplines that the enforcement division is required to maintain and certify annually.

When we have new wardens, it takes quite a while to get them on the ground. Many of them must go through the state law enforcement academy (three months) and also spend about three months completing field training. New wardens sign a contract that they will remain in their initial duty station for 30 months but are eligible to apply for a transfer after 24 months. We typically lose wardens because they come to us from the western part of the state, they're young people often without family in the area and they move back closer to where they are from.

Ed asked if the 30-month policy needs changed. Jack replied that that's in their union contract. He thinks it's hard to say and that its partly a happiness thing. We do not wish to hold anyone back from where they want to go, what they want to do and where they want to be. It affects Region 7 probably more than other regions, but at the same time we don't want to hold people back and want to encourage them to succeed and be happy. It's been this way for a long time.

Region 7 Warden Sergeant Todd Anderson added that he feels it's harder to be in law enforcement now than it was in the past, like 10 years ago. From the standpoint of legal stuff and the public's view, it's harder now than before. Young people also seem to have more turnaround and are looking for different careers all the time. He recently read that the average 20-year-old will change careers six times in their life.

Brad added we've focused on this a lot the last few years and tried to determine if there is a common trend, but he doesn't feel there is. A lot of the hires we get are young with no spouse and they're not from the area. That's just a few reasons but there's a variety of reasons for why these folks come and go.

Dale stated that he wonders if some of those people don't get out here where its more remote and become overwhelmed by the expanse of their district.

Mrs. Bukoskey asked when high schools have career or educations day if FWP has a presence there, to which Brad said we do try to a lot of times. Some staff from Helena sometimes attend those events, too.

Bob Gilbert added that he wonders if the education requirement is a deterrent and if a Bachelor's degree is totally necessary. Brad replied that we don't want less of an education requirement. That was a question in front of the Legislation several years ago. Over time we were able to increase wardens' pay and do market adjustment to where they're slightly below a biologist now. Todd added that pay has become less of a factor in why wardens leave.

Jack continued by saying that one high profile case from this region is currently at the U.S. Attorney's office waiting for prosecution and it's been there for quite some time. Likewise, there is another significant case that is at the state Attorney General's office that has also been there for a long time.

Rep. Holmlund inquired as to how wardens are paid, if any of that comes from the General Fund. Jack replied that wardens are paid from money that comes out of hunting and fishing license sales, Pittman-Robertson, Coast Guard, AIS, Parks and OHV funding. Brad added that there is no General Fund money involved in warden pay.

### **Communication & Education Division Update**

Marla Prell, Region 7 Information Officer, noted that this is the time of year where we're gearing up for fall hunting seasons and big game forecasts. The Comm Ed division is meeting in October and one of their topics of discussion is going to be Chronic Wasting Disease. Some staff in Region 7 have been participating in Incident Command training. Educational activities have taken up a big portion of her summer. Some of the activities she's had include a family kayaking night, which Brad and an intern from Helena helped with, and a lure making class. She also worked with Miles Community College to put on some "Kids Kollege" sessions that included young kids learning about animal tracks, scat and sign, and owls and eagles. These were very well received. Pine Hills Youth Correctional Facility also asked her to make a visit to them where she discussed and showed animals skulls and hides. She was very pleased with how that visit went, and Pine Hills would like to have her back. Biologists have also been doing public educational activities in the field with fish, bats and other wildlife and she is compiling all that data.

The Hunter Ed program instituted a new test this year. A new requirement with that is that online students must also take and pass this written test. This was requested by instructors as a way to verify that online students are actually completing the online requirements themselves. Region 7 currently has about 80 active instructors in eleven counties. We have had gained a few new instructors of late. There have been 383 students who've completed Hunter Ed in Region 7 in the last year, of which about 40% were female. Montana had about 5,000 Apprentice hunters signed up throughout the state last year, and this program continues to grow in popularity. There are about 35 active Bow Ed instructors in Region 7. We've had about 80 classroom students and 90 online students for Bow Ed in the last year.

Aquatic Ed is also part of Marla's program. This includes the Kids Fishing Days held each spring and summer. Those are an entire-agency effort that includes assistance from fisheries biologists, wardens and other volunteers. We typically service about 800 kids across the regions from schools and other programs. Kids learn about water safety, hypothermia, fish ID and receive a pole and actually get to try their hand at fishing with our assistance. She is hoping to institute the 'Hooked on Fishing' program into the region soon.

### **Fisheries Division Update**

Region 7 Fisheries Manager Mike Backes started with an update on the paddlefish season. That season went fast last year but was much slower this year. Last year's season was four harvest days while this year's was 15 harvest days. We had a bigger water year this year, so those fish were scattered everywhere. This year was very hard to predict; some days hardly any fish would be caught and then there was days where 80 fish would be harvested. It was challenging but turned out well. He noted that the Glendive Chamber did very well this year with their egg collection.

One thing of interest is that one in ten on average of the paddlefish caught were young fish, probably from the 2011 age class. Early indications are that this age class could be as big or larger than the 1995 age class, which was the last known large age class. This is encouraging as we were starting to wonder if there was another age class out there that could augment the 1995 age class.

Regarding the Intake bypass project, the judge recently ruled to allow that project to move forward. The Bureau of Reclamation and Corps of Engineers had a site visit with contractors at Intake last week. It sounds like they are hoping for work to start as soon as this fall, but the entire project will end up taking about two and one-half to three years. Mike is confident that paddlefish will use the fish structure at Intake once that is in place. The bypass will allow paddlefish to scatter even more so.

Pallid sturgeon are being monitored intently right now. Last year was the first year the Bureau of Reclamation was mandated by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to try to capture as many pallid sturgeons as possible who make it to Intake with a transmitter and release them over the Intake dam to evaluate where they go and if there's any upstream locations they can spawn, and similar information. Last year five pallids were captured and moved over the dam. Three of those fish continued up the Yellowstone and went up the Powder River as far as 90 miles. Seven fish were captured and moved over the dam this year, and five more fish went through the side channel during the prolonged high water. We monitored those fish closely; there was no female and we didn't notice a concentration of those fish anywhere to indicate that they were spawning. One fish did go up to about river mile 90 on the Powder again, though. Three years of data now have indicated that the Powder River is a functional draw for those fish. Additionally, two fish (a wild male and one juvenile) migrated upstream of the Powder/Yellowstone confluence in 2018 which is the first documented presence of telemetered pallid sturgeon in this reach of the river. The wild male migration apexed approximately five miles upstream of Miles City. The juvenile migrated up to Cartersville Dam at Forsyth. Currently only the juvenile fish is still located in the Yellowstone River upstream of Intake Dam, all other fish have migrated back downstream most to the Missouri River.

Mike then mentioned the ice on the river this spring. The long, cold winter led to substantial ice on the Yellowstone. We were lucky in this area in that the ice went out slow and gently. However, there was an eight-mile-long ice jam near Savage. This ended up devastating our site at Elk Island and caused catastrophic damage there. Both boat ramps were basically destroyed, as well as there being other site damage.

We lost one fishing access site recently in the area but are exploring some new possibilities, including one near Terry.

Regarding our pond system, there was lots of runoff in the Plevna/Baker/Ekalaka area, but surprisingly little in the area north of Miles City and Cherry Creek. Consequently, some of our ponds got stocked and are doing well but others suffered and weren't worth stocking this spring and summer. We stock what we can mostly from our Hatchery and will try to do some wild fish transfers this fall for species like bluegill, crappie and perch.

Mike concluded by mentioning that he's currently involved with an internal committee that is reviewing our regulations. They've been tasked with seeing what we can do to improve their usability and readability. They're culminating their suggestions to take to the Director sometime in December. If anyone has comments or suggestions, Mike welcomes those.

Brad discussed the Parks in Focus group. This was a group that Director Williams was tasked by the Governor to develop. This committee works with her and the Parks division. Our current regional Parks Manager is Doug Habermann, who is based out of Billings and covers basically the entire eastern part of the state. Director Williams has looked at Parks and the general process of how we work together as divisions between regions and at the Helena level. Her goal is to try to get more interconnection between everyone. In the bigger picture, Director Williams' vision is really to try to unify our entire agency and get folks to look at the broader purpose of what we do.

As part of Director Williams' big picture, we held an all staff meeting in Helena in April. It wasn't without some minor controversy but there were some real positives that came from that. There was a great opportunity to talk about a common philosophy and how we meet our customers' needs. We're doing our best to help Director Williams meet her goals.

We held a regional meeting jointly with Region 6 in June. Director Williams came to that meeting along with some members of the Parks Board and other Helena staff. This meeting went very well and was well received by Director Williams.

There was some controversy earlier this year with the Land Board and conservation easements. The one CE that John referred to got caught up in the Land Board for a variety of reasons. There was pressure from both sides on the agency to come to fruition with the CE. Ultimately, the Governor decided that we didn't need to go through the Land Board and the process was completed. Brad only brings this up because it makes us a little bit nervous moving forward with the conservation easements we have in the works now. There's a lot of work that goes into these conservation easements but when you look at the benefit they provide to sportsmen, it's all worth it. They're of great value to use and that's why we keep working on them.

Brad concluded by thanking members for bringing their spouses and partners to the meeting. Within our region we try to promote spending time with our families. It's great to see these folks joining us here tonight.

### **Roundtable Discussion**

Dale began by saying he is proud of the culture in this part of the state. Out of area hunters to his Block Management Area (BMA) regularly are impressed by and comment on how nice people are out here. He has noticed lots of repeat BMA hunters but less of them seem to be local folks. He is not seeing much for upland birds but has noticed good numbers of antelope with lots of fawns. He asked if we're seeing more youth hunters. Erin replied that for this year, it's a bit early yet but we are starting to see folks get their kids signed up for this year's Apprentice Program. We'll see more and more as it gets closer to deer season. It seems like that program continues to grow every year. We offered a third Hunter Ed class this year for the first time in several years. This was mainly due to demand so it's evident that there is lots of youth interest in hunting, at least locally.

Marla added that the Apprentice program is growing statewide. So far, we haven't heard a lot of negative feedback from Hunter Ed instructors who are getting apprentices in their classes now, which is encouraging to her. Erin included that one of our Hunter Ed classes this spring actually had more girls than boys for the first time in recent memory. Todd added that he feels there's no question based on what he sees in the field that there's more women hunting. Many mention to him that they hunt because it's a healthy meat.

Rep. Holmlund provided an update on the Hell Creek road project. There were three major contractors who got started June 1. Three inches of gravel and magnesium chloride mix didn't end up being enough, so contractors ended up having to use five inches, which turned into six inches in some spots as the road base was terrible. It took six days to lay all the gravel out. Contractors noted that there were soft spots in the road. Fixing those involves digging down 15 feet and packing the dirt, which there wasn't time or money to deal with. There is 8/10 of a mile that didn't get done. Unfortunately, drivers have been speeding on the road now. There is still some leftover gravel which we can use if need be. His goal is still to get 50,000 visitors at Hell Creek State Park.

Bob G. noted that folks in eastern Montana have always been able to do things for ourselves and we don't expect help. He is still involved with the License Funding Advisory Committee and has been thinking about options for AIS funding. One point of contention for him is the regulation that live fish being transported in a live well must be in well water. Who is actually going to check that water and be able to tell where it's from? He doesn't feel this is practical and it doesn't make sense.

Mark mentioned that we haven't seen him for a while as he has had some health issues and his wife passed away. He's now living in Circle.

Ed provided some notes from his involvement with the PLPW group. He has suggested there be a \$10 fee that would go towards both CWD and AIS as neither are going to go away. The 454 permit issue came up and he believes it will be moving forward. One issue was that people wanted to be able to sell that tag.

Glenn said it's been a great meeting. And he was lucky enough to draw a bison tag this year.

Gary wondered how many in attendance have been to Montana Wild. He noted that 40 students from Plevna took a field trip to Montana Wild this spring. This was via a first-come, first-served grant available from FWP, which was used to pay for the students' hotel rooms and meals. He praised the Department for this opportunity, and said it was a wonderful experience. He feels this opportunity is currently under-utilized and he would encourage other teachers and schools to take advantage of it.

Bob H. said Mother Nature has smiled on us this year and gave us a good productive year with lots of feed for wildlife and livestock. He hopes this will be start of a good, long run of it. He would say it seems that the mule deer fawn crop is less than normal and the same with overall antelope numbers in his area. But there's still good numbers of deer out there he feels. Mrs. Hagedorn noted that she, too, has noticed the pheasant population seems to have suffered last winter and this spring.

Ed B. added that there was a positive brucellosis hit in a cow elk in the Tendoy.

**Conclusion**

Brad thanked CAC members and guests for attending. We will be in touch with winter meeting plans. It will likely be in December before the legislative session kicks off.